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ABSTRACT

A portfolio is a meaningful collection of student work that tells the story of student achievement or growth. There are two basic reasons for doing portfolios--assessment or instruction. Benefits for using portfolios in instruction include the development of students self-reflection, critical thinking, responsibility for learning, and content area skills and knowledge. Assessment use of portfolios, a collection of multiple samples of student work over time, enable one to: (1) get a broader, more in-depth look at what students know and can do; (2) base assessment on more "authentic" work; (3) have a supplement or alternative to report cards and standardized tests; and (4) have a better way to communicate about student progress to parents. Three common assessment uses of portfolios are: (1) certification of competence; (2) tracking growth over time; and (3) accountability. Strong portfolio systems are characterized by a clear vision of the student skills to be addressed, student involvement in selecting what goes into the portfolio, use of criteria to define quality performance and to provide a basis for communication, and self-reflection through which students share what they think and feel about their work, their learning environment, and themselves. (JBJ)

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by Judith A. Arter, Vicki Spandel and Ruth Culham

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Portfolios For Assessment And Instruction

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Overview

Portfolios are scarcely a new concept, but renewed interest, fueled by the portfolio's perceived promise for both improving assessment and motivating and involving students in their own learning, has recently increased their visibility and use. The definition of a portfolio varies some from, but there seems to be a general consensus that a portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of student achievement or growth. (Portfolios are not folders of all the work a student does.) Within this limited definition there are portfolio systems that: promote student self-assessment and control of learning; support student-led parent conferences; select students into special programs; certify student competence; grant alternative credit, demonstrate to employers certain skills and abilities; build student self-confidence, and evaluate curriculum and instruction.

Because there is no single correct way to "do" portfolios, and because they appear to be used for so many things, developing a portfolio system can spell confusion and stress, much coming from not realizing that portfolios are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. More specifically, confusion occurs to the extent there is lack of clarity on: (a) the purpose to be served by the portfolio, and (b) the specific skills to be developed or assessed by the portfolio.

It is important to keep in mind that there are really only two basic reasons for doing portfolios--assessment or instruction. Assessment uses relate to keeping track of what students know and can do. Instructional uses relate to promoting learning--students learn something from assembling the portfolio.

Instructional Uses

The perceived benefit for instruction is that the process of assembling a portfolio can help develop student self-reflection, critical thinking, responsibility for learning, and content area skills and knowledge. (It is important to point out that most of the evidence to support these claims comes from logical argument and anecdotes. There exists very little "hard" evidence that demonstrates the impact of portfolios on students.)

These benefits aren't automatic; they have to be built into the portfolio system. Suppose you are a teacher of writing. You want students to improve their ability to write, and become skilled self-assessors to improve their writing.Using portfolios, what things would need to be in place? First, students need time and instruction in writing. But in addition, you and they need a clear and explicit vision of what it means to write well. How can students become skilled self-assessors if they don't know the target at which they are aiming?

This vision is often expressed using criteria that define writing performance across a range of proficiency levels. Clear criteria might specify, for instance, that a strong piece of writing would have elaborated ideas, rich with vivid details; or an introduction that draws the reader in while setting up what is to follow; or engaging, expressive voice. These criteria, which describe what it means to write well, not only serve as a guide to revision, but they provide students with a vocabulary for thinking, talking and writing about writing. Students who internalized these criteria could use them to revise their work, reflect on it, and set goals. The student could then use a portfolio to create a collection of best writing, or diverse writing (poetry, exposition, persuasive essays, journalism, stories), or a process portfolio showing how one piece evolved from brainstorming through publication, or a growth portfolio showing how her revision skills had improved.

Ironically, the instructional benefits of portfolios are not dependent on the portfolios. Close examination of work, comparison over time, identification of strengths and weaknesses through good criteria that define quality, goal setting, connecting personal best or favorite work with who students are becoming as learners: All can occur when the vision for success is clearly defined. What is really important is not the portfolio itself so much as what students learn by creating. Students can review and reflect on their work regularly whether or not they make a portfolio. The portfolio is a means to the end, not the end itself.

A classic example of an instructional portfolio system is the Arts PROPEL secondary creative writing, visual arts and music portfolios in Pittsburgh Public Schools. The goals are to increase achievement levels and have students take control of their own learning through systematic reflection on work and goal setting. (See Yancey, 1992; Camp, 1992; and ASCD, 1992, for additional discussion of instructional uses.)

Assessment Uses

The perceived benefits for assessment are that the collection of multiple samples of student work over time enables us to (a) get a broader, more in-depth look at what students know and can do; (b) base assessment on more "authentic" work; (c) have a supplement or alternative to report cards and standardized tests; and (d) have a better way to communicate student progress to parents. Large-scale assessment (assessment outside of and across classrooms) tends to focus on reasons (a) and (b). Teachers tend to like portfolios for reasons (c) and (d). We will look at three common assessment uses of portfolios and then discuss some assessment issues.

Certification of Competence. A "passportfolio" shows readiness to move on to a new level of work or employment. For example, the Science Portfolio is an optional part of the Golden State Examination (California State Department of Education, 1994), a large-scale assessment for high school students. It is produced during a year of science and contains a "problem solving investigation," a "creative expression" (presenting a scientific idea in a unique and original manner), a "growth through writing" that demonstrates progress in understanding a scientific concept over time, and self-reflection that enlarges on the entries. Performance criteria have been developed to judge each type of entry.

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A higher stakes large-scale example is associated with "Certificate of Mastery" efforts in several states. Plans in Oregon call for portfolios to illustrate student progress toward (in the lower grades) or mastery of (by about grade 10) the state's eleven major goals for students.

Tracking Growth Over Time. A growth portfolio is a chronological collection that shows how skills, attitudes, etc. have changed over time. Early works are contrasted with later pieces. A large-scale example comes from Juneau, Alaska--The Integrated Language Arts Portfolio used in the primary grades. The portfolio is designed to replace report cards and standardized tests as ways to demonstrate growth and achievement. Growth is tracked using "developmental continuums," which describe stages of development for reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Student status on the continuum is marked at several designated times during the school year. Teacher judgments of developmental stage are backed up with samples of student work.

Accountability. Accountability uses relate to demonstrating to the community the impact of the education. A large-scale example is Vermont's grade 4 and 8 math portfolios. Students place 5 to 7 items in their portfolio to demonstrate their competence as problem solvers. The work is assessed using performance criteria for problem solving and math communication. An example at the classroom level is student-led parent conferences in which students prepare portfolios in order to demonstrate to parents what they have learned. (See Little, 1988, for an example.)

Assessment Issues. Assessment uses of portfolios, especially large-scale, high-stakes uses (for example, high school graduation), are not without controversy. Some of these issues are: 1.What is the extent to which we need to "standardize" the portfolio process, content, and performance criteria so that results are comparable? 2. Is it feasible to accurately and consistently assess student skills through portfolios? Won't this be costly? (Rand Corporation's 1992 study of the Vermont portfolio system provides an intriguing analysis of this issue.) 3. How do we get teacher buy-in? After all, teachers will be responsible for making sure that portfolios get assembled properly. 4. Will the conclusions we draw about students from their portfolios be valid? The work may not really be the students' best, or may be someone else's entirely. There are, as yet, no definitive answers to these questions, although many fear that high-stakes uses of portfolios will destroy their instructional usefulness.

Consensual Points of View

There appear to be several points on which most people agree:

Portfolios are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. The user must have a clear vision of what the "end" is.

Purpose will influence all other design and use decisions. Consider the two major purposes examined above. Portfolio systems that have assessment as the primary purpose tend to: be more structured (there is more uniformity as to the items that are placed in the portfolio and the times at which they are entered); develop performance criteria primarily to allow "raters" to judge student status and monitor student growth; result in portfolios that belong to the institution;use self-reflection to gain insight about student achievement and progress; and require more time and skills for teachers to manage. Portfolios that are used for instruction tend to: belong more to the student; be less structured; develop performance criteria for use by students for self-reflection; treat student self-reflection as essential for learning; and require more time and skills for students to manage. Once the purpose is clear, questions about what goes in, who decides, use of criteria, and how self-reflection is used are much easier and more logical.

There must be a clear vision of achievement targets for students. Ask this important question: What is my vision of success for my students? If you can answer this question *very clearly* you will find the process of creating portfolios much easier.

There must be student involvement in the portfolio process. Student involvement includes selecting portfolio content, developing criteria for success, and self-reflection. Even those portfolios closest to the "assessment" end of the continuum recognize the benefit from involving students in the process. If teachers put portfolios together for students, not only is this a tremendous burden for them, students learn nothing from the process. Some authors even take the position that if any other use takes precedence over instruction, portfolios will fall victim tothe same issues as past large-scale assessment attempts.

Clear and complete performance criteria are essential. For assessment purposes, we use criteria to generate scores or grades for students. However, the major value of criteria is that they assist us to articulate a clear vision of our goals for students and a vocabulary for communicating with students about these targets. Students could be partners in their development.

Conclusion

Strong portfolio systems are characterized by a clear vision of the student skills to be addressed, student involvement in selecting what goes into the portfolio, use of criteria to define quality performance and provide a basis for communication, and self-reflection through which students share what they think and feel about their work, their learning environment and themselves.

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